

Let Justice & Righteousness Flow
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As you are turning to Amos—and it may take a moment; it's sometimes a difficult book to find; if you go to roughly halfway through your Bible, Psalms, Proverbs, that area, take a right, it's after Isaiah, major prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, those sort of guys, and then you end up coming up to Hosea and Joel...it's after that. So as you guys are finding that, I'll tell ya how it is that it came about that I am preaching Amos today. See, about two weeks ago Larry, our senior pastor, he...we were sittin' in his office and we were talking about the Minor Prophets. And I shared with him about how I really liked Amos 7:14. And he was like "Excellent! Guess what? You can preach Amos." So all of a sudden, I'm up here preachin' Amos.

But Amos 7:14...what I really appreciated about it is this. Some time ago when I was in college, I was gonna be speaking in a church setting. And I was just nervous, not feelin' good, everything else, just terrified. And a friend of mine—Jason was his name—he said, "Hey man, listen. Just...I was readin', quiet time today, feel like God told me to give you this verse." And it was Amos 7:14. Basically what it is...Amos has been preaching, people don't like it too much, and so what ends up happening is there's this guy; he basically says 'Sit down and shut up' to Amos. And Amos looks at him and he says, 'Look, here's the deal, man. I'm...I didn't ask for this job. I'm not the son of a prophet. I'm just, you know, a farmer. I hang out with sheep and I take care of fruit trees. That's what I do. But I can't help it. God came. He said "Here, go tell the people this." So what am I gonna do? God told me to come, so here I am.' And I take great comfort in that, for this reason. If God can take a farmer who didn't ask to be a prophet, and He can turn him into a prophet of God who ends up writing scripture, then maybe there is some hope that He can do something with me.

And so, as I look at it, as we go into Amos we may think there is not a whole lot in common. After all, Amos lived in a very different time than we do. He is...he lived about 750 years before Christ. And he's in a period of time in nation's...in Israel's history, national history there, where there's civil war or there has been; and now the country is divided between north and south, ten tribes, two tribes. And so we may look at it and we may say, 'you know, there's not a whole lot in common here.'

But in actuality, there is. There's a lot in common between Amos' day and what he was dealin' with and what he saw, and what's going on here in our own culture and around us, in our midst, out in the world. And it's just, to give you an idea before we get into this, a little bit of what Amos saw goin' on around him...is the nation of Israel was, to all outward appearances it was in a wonderful time of its history. They enjoyed military might, they had expanded their boundaries, they were a formidable opponent—kinda like America, you know...one of the mightiest nations in the world militarily speaking. They were economically strong. See, they controlled all this territory where there were trade routes goin' through. And so if anybody wanted to do trade throughout the region, they pretty much had to go through Israel at one point or another. And so as the result, Israel got to take their cut of the profits. They were doin' well. And America is much the same, you know—economic ups and downs, and whatever else. Everybody in the world wants to trade with America.

You look at it...the Israelite people were also very religious, spiritual people. They worshipped God, or gods; they made sacrifices; they built temples; they worshipped, they prayed, they gave money. They did all kinds of things for religion. Americans are the same. I mean, come on, think about it. Now we may not be a Christian nation per se, but we are very much a religious, spiritual people. I mean, let's put it this way. Where else could somebody come and, with a straight face, stand up at an awards ceremony or something like that, you know, and basically thank God and give Jesus the credit for giving him the ability to be an up-and-coming, emerging artist who basically spews verbal pornography, and he says, 'Thank God that He gave me the gift,' and everybody doesn't bat an eye. I mean, you know, we're used to people talking about God. It's ok so long as I don't insist that my God needs to also be your God.

There's a whole lot of similarities between us and Israel. And the thing is this—Amos is speaking to that. And he looks at it and he says, 'You know, it may look like everything is goin' on good here and we've got it all together, but there's a major problem.' And at the heart of the problem what he ends up doing, in Amos 5...and this is kind of right around there, if you look in Amos 5, that's right around where we're going to be spending the majority of our time. That's the focus of the book, right in here at the tail end of Amos.

And what he ends up saying is this. He says, 'This is what God is wanting to tell the people. He says, "I hate, I despise your feasts. I can't stand the stench of your solemn assemblies. When you come together to worship you can do whatever you want. I hate it. I despise it. I want to turn away from it. It's like a nasty stench that makes Me want to throw up."'

And then He goes on and He says, "I'm not going to accept your sacrifices. I don't care how many animals you bring. I don't care how much money you give. I don't care what you do. It's just...I'm not going to accept it. It's not ok to Me."

Finally He says, "You know, I'm not even going to listen to the music of your hearts. You can sing all you want. You can feel like, you know, you are totally in touch with God. But I'm not going to listen. I'm going to plug my ears and I'm going to turn away from you."

And you know, we look at that, and here's the thing. We would easily say, "Well, what in the world?! Does God not care about these things? Does God not care if I go to church, or if the people are going to church, or to the temple, or whatever else?" Well, that's not exactly the problem. See, because He goes on in the next verse and He says this... "Instead of all these things, instead of all this religious stuff that you do, what I really care about, if you really want to know what I want to see," He says,

"Let justice flow like water, and righteousness like an unfailing stream."

"That's what I care about."

Now don't get this wrong here. This is not some social gospel where it says, 'Ok, let's throw out religion or whatever else, and let's go help people.' That's not what he's saying, ok? And we're gonna get into it. Because see, here's the thing. Justice and righteousness—the ideas here—these are both very clear terms, very specific terms. It's the idea of a courtroom. These are legal terms. Justice we'll talk about in just a moment, but I think everybody probably has a pretty good idea of what justice is. Righteousness is a very simple thing as well. The concept is this—imagine you are standing accused of a crime in a court. And what ends up happening through the court proceedings is you were found to be blameless before the law; you were found to be innocent, the charges are dropped, whatever it may be. You are now righteous before the court. You are now in right standing with the judge. That's what righteousness means. It's the idea that we are made right with God. We are now in right-standing with Him; we have a right relationship. The charges have been dropped. We are found blameless before the Law. That's what righteousness means, and God says, 'Really, you know what? I don't care about all the good things you do. I don't care about all your works. What I really care about is if your heart is right with Me. Are you at a heart-level right with Me? Is My righteousness and justice flowing into and through you to a dying, hungry, thirsty world?' That's what He cares about.

And so, you know, justice...ok, what's justice? Well, here's the thing. Amos doesn't really define justice in this book. He doesn't say, 'this is what I mean by justice.' Instead, what he does is he does the opposite. Instead he gives...it's not some categorical list of what is 'injust', or 'here's the things you need to avoid...boom, boom, boom, boom, boom.' Instead, what he does is he gives ideas of 'look, this is what I'm talking about,' to get you started, to get you thinking, to get you just to see what it is that you're doing that strikes against injustice...or strikes against justice.

And the first thing...and so we're going to go through a few of these things. The first one is this—taking advantage of people in need. That's the first thing that Amos kind of hits on, is when you take advantage of people who are needy. You have a position of power over them in one way or another, and you take advantage of that. It's the idea that you have some sort of influence and you decide to leverage it as much as you can for your own advantage. In particular, Amos is hitting on the needy people; and there are plenty of situations that I think we can think of; and we're like, 'Man, probably I don't do that. I don't...I'm not somebody who has...I'm not employing all kinds of people. It's not as though I have low-income housing or anything else that I am over. So I am not doing this.'

Well, just this morning...this hit me hard just this morning. I was on my way to church and saw a guy that I know. He was walking along the side of the road, going to work. He works at one of the eating establishments here in town. And so I pulled over to the side, picked him up, was like, 'Hey, you headin'...you know, where you goin'?'

'Oh, to work, whatever.'

So we were on his way, I took him to work, and we were just talking; I was askin' him how long he was working, and he told me. And then he said, "Man, I'm not looking forward to this."

And I'm like, "What's up?"

And he's like, "I hate Sundays."

I said, "What do you mean?"

And he said, "Well, you would think Sundays are a good day, but I hate Sundays because I hate working the lunch hour. As soon as, right around the time that church is getting' out, what ends up happening is the place is flooded. And then you have a whole bunch of people who are impatient. And you would think...I'm guessin' they're church people...and you would think they would be friendly, but they are the worst people I deal with all week long." He said, "I hate Sundays."

And I look at that...here is a guy who is makin' like minimum wage, and he is in a position of need. We have leverage over him. And what ends up happening is people come, and he needs the job that he has, and so he has to try and give you service with a smile as best he can. And people turn around and treat him just like he doesn't deserve any respect. See, it strikes—that's injustice. That's injustice. That's the sort of thing that Amos is talkin' about.

Next one he talks about, he hits on, is making a show of being religious. He talks about how the people of Israel...they loved to come to church, they loved to pray, to give money, whatever it is, because it makes their consciences feel good. It makes them say, 'ok, I'm a good, religious person,' and it helps them feel good, so they love to do that. And basically, God says 'You know what? I don't care about all the religion. I don't care about all the good things you do. In fact, all that's doing is that is actually injustice, because you're pretending to be something that you're not. You're not having integrity.' It's kind of the idea that He would rather you just go ahead and go and do whatever you wanna do, and live however you wanna live if you're not actually going to live it consistently, and it's not gonna transform your life.

Next thing is this. He goes and he talks about how people despise moral accountability and integrity. And the idea...I mean, let's think about this. This is one that's a big one in our culture. I mean, think about it. We hate, hate, hate the idea that there is some universal, moral, absolute truth. We all do at some level. I admit it. I am one of them that hates this. I admit that there is an absolute truth that I must, in an absolute morality defined by God in His nature itself, that I must live under. But I still hate that fact many times, because let's put it this way—what I hate is how...like I'll be doin' somethin' or I'm goin' along, and all of a sudden somebody calls me on somethin'. They say, 'Man, that's messed up. That's wrong.' Whatever it is...and the first thing that kicks into my head and into my heart is, 'uh uh, you can't tell me what to do. You can't tell me that that's... Uh uh. No.' I don't want to be held morally accountable. That's why, if you think about it, so often we are very quick to justify our own actions, find an excuse, 'well, it was a mistake; I did the best in the situation I could,' whatever it is. And the simple fact of the matter is, the bottom line—ok, I was wrong.

'Course, that's also where the integrity comes in. See, we hate hypocrites; we also love 'em. We hate 'em because it's like we look at 'em and we're like, 'Man, they say this and then they do that. They're such hypocrites.' The thing is, we're all hypocrites. We are. In one way or another, one part of our life or another; we say one thing and we do something else. But that's also why we love 'em, because when we can look at somebody and say, 'Man, that person doesn't have integrity. They're living one way and not another,' it makes us feel good about ourselves. It's kind of one of those things that we can then look at and say, 'Well, I'm not quite like that,' and it allows us to excuse ourselves morally more than we once did. That's another means of injustice right there.

The next one is this. He says you don't insure that justice is done. This is kind of a nice little catch-all that Amos throws in there, and this is one that just cuts to the quick; because what he's saying is, 'Look—you may look at it, and you may hear all these things, and everything else, and you may say ok, that's not me, I don't do that, I do...I treat people fairly, I treat people with respect, there's this, that, whatever.' What Amos says is, 'Guess what? There is a situation that you see injustice and you don't step in and do whatever is in your power to correct it...you are just as guilty. If you don't ensure that justice is done, you're guilty of injustice. See, it's not somethin' that we can just sit by and be passive about. If somebody's talkin' about somebody else behind their back, we can't just let the conversation go on and not step in and say, "Hey, that's messed up, and that's wrong." We may not be able to correct the injustice, but we are just as guilty if we don't step in and do what we can for somebody in need, or for somebody who's a disadvantage, or any time we see injustice.'

And finally, Amos hits on kind of one other big, broad thing in here. And he talks about how the people in his day are living comfortably, regardless of the needy around them. They're living in their big houses, eatin' their awesome food, drinkin' whatever, you know, and they're...I don't know...ridin' to work on their...you know, whatever the status symbol camel is of the day, wearin' their Armani robes, or whatever it is. And he says that's wrong! If you can live this way and you don't even have a heart for the people around you who are starving, there's somethin' messed up! That's not the way God wants it to be. I mean, God wants us to take care of one another, of the people around us. That doesn't mean that everybody is gonna live the same. What it does mean is that we need to be very, very, very careful and look at our lives very hard, and say 'am I living in such a way that I am taking care of the people around me?'

Yes, there is an element where scripture talks about it is good to enjoy the fruits of your labors. But there's also a very strong element where it says don't enjoy it too much if somebody else around you is in need. I think of C. S. Lewis. He mentioned, you know, a good idea of where you're at in this...he mentions about how, you know, you should almost be a little bit uncomfortable. If we're not a little uncomfortable with somethin' in our lives, we have what we're wanting and everything else, then probably we aren't quite takin' this seriously enough. And there's more that we could do. It's some thing that there isn't a hard and fast rule, but it's something that we need to take seriously. And it was a problem in Amos' day, and it's a problem today.

So what's the answer to this? What...ok, what is it in Amos? I tell you what, he's like...he comes in and he's just like "BAM, BAM, BAM, BAM, BAM!" and he's nailin' these people. But see, the thing is he's also encouraging them. And he calls them to action. And that's where we are, is this, ok? God would have us call...answer to His call to action. And the call to action in Amos is very simple. It's a very simple thing. It's a simple thing of this—He says simple equation, simple process—seek good, hate evil, and establish justice. Seek good, hate evil, and establish justice. And let justice flow like water and righteousness like an unfailing stream. The idea is that it's not just some flash flood that comes because 'I feel guilty now' and "Boom! Here you go," and I'm gonna try and wipe out the landscape.

No. It's the idea that there is this constant flow of refreshment that feeds day after day after day. What God wants is for our hearts to be transformed, and then so that He can pour into us, and that begins to overflow to the people around us; where we extend God's grace, His justice, His righteousness to a world that is hungry and thirsty and dying. That's what God wants from us.

First step is simply this—if you are not a Christian here today, if you are not somebody who is a follower of Christ, if you have never come to the point where you say, 'You know what? I am a sinner, I am screwed up, and I need a lot of help, and I can't do this alone,' that's basically the first step. You come to the point where you realize, 'You know what? I'm not gonna be enough. I'm a screw up. I admit it. I'm fine admitting that. And I need help. I can't earn God's favor.' And the beautiful thing is that Jesus paid the sacrifice. He came, He was 100% God, 100% man, and He came and He lived a perfect life, and then He died and He came back alive. And the offer that He gives us is this—'If you will let Me,'—you know that courtroom lingo we were talking about? That whole justice, righteousness, everything else? What Jesus says is this. 'If you will let Me stand in your place, I will take your place in the box of the accused.' And He says, "I will stand there, and I'll take the punishment for you." And so, what happens is He says, 'Listen, we're gonna switch places, and I will take that punishment. I will take the consequences.' And all of a sudden you are made righteous and blameless before the court of God. And Jesus says, 'the only hitch is this—instead of belonging to yourself, you now belong to Me. That's it. Give Me your sin, I will take your full punishment, and you belong to Me.'

If you're here and you are a follower of Christ, the message is simple. The application is simple. It's just this—look at your life and seek out where there may be injustice. I guarantee I am guilty of it, and I guarantee each of us are guilty of it in different ways. There are things that is goin' through this...I'm like, 'Man, yeah, that's me right there.'

Joel is gonna make his way up here, and we're gonna end this service a little bit differently. And here is how I'm gonna explain what we're gonna do here. Joel is going to play a song; it was the song that was played earlier here; and it's a song based on Amos 5:34. And I just want you to use this time to reflect, to meditate, and to ask yourself, "Where am I in Amos? Where am I? Am I somebody that basically God looks at and He says, 'You know what? You're not even right with Me to begin with. I don't care about all the good things you do. I don't care about all your religion. I don't care about any of that. What I care about is your heart being made right, and that won't happen until you do business with Jesus.'" Or maybe it's something that...you're already a follower of Jesus, and you look at it and you say, 'Man, this is an area of my life that I need to change. And I need to seek justice, and make sure that justice and righteousness is done.'

So I just invite you to take, as Joel plays this song, that you would take these few moments and meditate. After that, after he's done, I'll have you stand and I'll close us in prayer. And then, if you would like to speak with anybody, to pray with anybody, please feel free after the service to come down front. We have our prayer zone, myself, a couple of other pastors, elders will be up here to talk with you. Thanks.

[Joel begins playing and singing the following.]*

*You are righteous when You speak, You are blameless when You judge,
All Your ways are just, O God.*

*You are gracious to the weak, You are faithful to Your word,
All Your ways are just, O God.*

*Let justice roll through Your servants,
Fashion our hearts after Yours.*

*Let justice flow forth like water, righteousness like a river strong,
Constant currents of compassion rushing through our hearts, O God.
Let justice flow, let justice flow.*

*Keep us from dishonest gain, keep us from our selfish ways,
May our ways be just, O God.*

*Reaching out to the oppressed, giving grace to those in need,
May our ways be just, O God.*

*Let justice roll through Your servants,
Fashion our hearts after Yours.*

*Let justice flow forth like water, righteousness like a river strong,
Constant currents of compassion rushing through our hearts, O God.
Let justice flow, let justice flow.*

*In the power of the cross of Christ,
Open our hearts, let justice flow!*

*Let justice flow forth like water, righteousness like a river strong,
Constant currents of compassion rushing through our hearts, O God.*

*Let justice flow forth like water, righteousness like a river strong,
Constant currents of compassion rushing through our hearts, O God.
Let justice flow, let justice flow.*

Please stand.

Lord God,

We thank you so very much for the truth of Your mercy and grace. And God, thank You for the fact that truly what You care about is our hearts being righteous with You, in right standing with You. God, I ask that You would go with us as we leave here, and ask that You would just help us be a part of how You let justice and righteousness flow to the world around us.

We pray this in Your name, amen.

Go in grace.

[*words and music by Joel Stamooolis, 2008]